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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI MIGRATION FLOWS UPDATE: THE VIEW FROM OBOCK

REF: 09 DJIBOUTI 327; 09 DJIBOUTI 283

CLASSIFIED BY: E. Wong, CDA; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and GODJ authorities, the northern Djiboutian town of Obock continues to be an increasingly popular transit point for Ethiopian and Somali migrants seeking to reach Yemen and the labor markets of the Gulf. During a recent trip to Obock, regional officials expressed serious concerns about local capacity to respond to this growing phenomenon. As well as straining local budgets and law enforcement resources, the reported arrival of up to 500 migrants a day has Obock's leadership worried about potential health risks, including the spread of AIDS and cholera. Local youths-facing high unemployment rates and lured by the prospect of "easy money"- have also reportedly become involved in smuggling migrants. Both UNHCR and Djibouti's new IOM office (ref A) are closely tracking the situation in Obock, and IOM and the GODJ have planned an informational campaign to educate potential migrants on the dangers of illegal migration. END SUMMARY.

OBOCK: 500 A DAY, WITH 1000 IN THE OFFING?

¶2. (SBU) During an August 11 trip to Obock, EmbOffs met with Obock Prefect Omar Farada and Obock Regional Council Secretary-General Hassan Meke. Up to 500 migrants a day, Farada said, now seek to use Obock as a jumping-off point for the sea journey to Yemen. Farada said that he was bracing for the numbers to continue creeping upward, and predicted that he might see as many as 1000 migrants a day during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan (slated to begin on or around August 21). Farada reported that while the flow of migrants was mixed, the majority were Ethiopians. Notable Ethiopian-nationality subgroups, he said, included Ogadenis, ethnic Afars, and demobilized Ethiopian soldiers. Many migrants, if apprehended by GODJ authorities and returned to their country of origin, simply attempt the trip again, often making as many as ten trips. Ethiopians, Farada said, generally borrow the money for the passage. When they are caught and returned to Ethiopia, their inability to repay these loans provides an additional incentive to re-attempt the Obock-Yemen trip.

TOO FEW RESOURCES TO FACE THE DELUGE

13. (SBU) Obock, Farada noted, did not have sufficient human, physical, or financial resources to cope with this increased flow. There were only 7 police officers and 5 gendarmes assigned to Obock, he said. Furthermore, the local facility for holding apprehended migrants was inadequate, and often reached capacity. On a positive note, Farada said that the Ministry of Justice (which is responsible for prisons) was now renovating the facility. The local budget was also strained, Farada said, by the cost of feeding apprehended migrants, and of transporting them back to Djibouti City. When GODJ transport resources are not available, the regional budget pays 700 DJF per person (approximately USD 4) to transport apprehended migrants to Djibouti City via privately hired boats. Upon arrival in Djibouti City, police bring apprehended migrants to the Nagad detention facility before deportation.

14. (SBU) Farada noted recent IOM-sponsored training for GODJ officials, as well as a planned IOM information campaign to educate potential migrants on the dangers of irregular migration. He commented, however, that more than billboards would be needed to manage and reduce the flow of illegal migrants. UNHCR's Djibouti Public Information Officer told EmbOffs that UNHCR was looking at the possibility of establishing a presence in Obock. While the flow through Obock may be mixed among different groups that may or may not qualify for refugee status, she said, the population clearly needs protective services.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN OBOCK: HEALTH, YOUTH, AND IMAGE

15. (SBU) Farada cited health concerns as a top side effect of illegal migration flows. He said that five or six Obock residents had already died of cholera after eating food that had also been served to migrants. There were no public toilet facilities that migrants could use, resulting in sanitation and health risks. The spread of AIDS was also a looming specter. Migrants, he said, also have a distorting effect on the local economy, with some bus drivers refusing to take locals when they can make quadruple the Djibouti-Obock fare by transporting migrants. Finally, Farada said, he disliked the idea of Obock becoming known as a "prison town" with facilities overflowing with apprehended and temporarily held migrants. This image, he said, would hurt Obock's ability to attract and retain teachers and other public servants.

16. (SBU) Young men in Obock, Farada said, were increasingly tempted by the "easy money" of involvement in migrant smuggling. Obock has a high youth unemployment rate, and many young people already leave the region to seek work in Djibouti City. Involvement in the migrant smuggling business can reportedly reap a young Obock resident up to 20,000 DJF (approximately USD 113) per week. Noting the lack of other opportunities, Regional Council Secretary-General Hassan Meke said that migrants had become a new economic engine for Obock. If somebody came to your door with money ready to pay and your belly was empty, he asked rhetorically, what would you do? Farada said that although 30 to 40 local young people had already ended up in prison for involvement in migrant smuggling, this was still not deterring young people from entering the illegal "business." To help provide legal alternatives, Obock was hoping to open a vocational training center, Farada said, and construction for the new facility was already underway.

ERITREA-DJIBOUTI BORDER CONFLICT: DESERTERS AND IDPS

¶7. (SBU) The ongoing stalemate in the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute continues to prevent cross-border travel and trade. Many Obock residents—who are largely ethnic Afars—have family ties to Eritrea. In addition, Obock's population historically falls under the traditional leadership of the Afar Sultan of Raheyta, who is based in Eritrea. With the border closed since June 2008, Farada said, Djiboutians who wish to visit family members in Eritrea sometimes travel via Yemen. Some Djiboutian families were displaced when the border conflict broke out in 2008, Farada said, but the numbers were low. These families had been evacuated to Khor Angar and Bisidoru, where they had received assistance from UNHCR.

¶8. (C) Separately, UNHCR continues to monitor the growing number of Eritrean defectors/deserters in Djiboutian custody at Nagad detention center (ref B).

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) Obock was one of the hardest-hit towns during Djibouti's civil conflicts of the mid-1990s, and its economic recovery has been slow. In the last year, ongoing tension at the Djibouti-Eritrea border has likely had an additional dampening effect on the local economy. The border dispute perhaps also played a supporting role—with the global financial crisis and other factors stalling—in silencing once-optimistic talk of a planned transcontinental bridge between Djibouti and Yemen, to include a new, futuristic city based in the Obock region. Yet despite these setbacks, Obock has recently benefitted from several donor and GODJ projects—including the completion of a redesigned Obock-Tadjourah road link, the planned start-up of a Japanese-funded ferry service, and the inauguration of a USD 14 million FMF-funded naval pier project—all of which promise to help Obock more effectively plug into the national economy. As Obock looks to shore up services and employ its own young people, increasing migrant flows—and the resource demands, health risks, and criminal networks that go with them—have the potential to derail fragile progress. In conjunction with the GODJ, IOM, and UNHCR, Post will continue to monitor the dynamics of the migrant flows through Obock and look for ways to mitigate dangers that impact both migrants and local populations.
END COMMENT.
WONG